

FIRST
HISTORY LESSONS

THE WORLD OF TEA

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Translated from original Bengali by
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Kolkata, November 2023

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Cover, map, and planning – Shabnam Yasmin

Printed by – S. S. Print, 8, Narasingha Lane, Raja Ram Mohan Roy Sarani, Kolkata - 700009

Publisher – Institute of Development Studies Kolkata,

27/D, DD Block, Sector 1, Bidhannagar, Kolkata, West Bengal 700064

Website – www.idsk.edu.in

Email – idsk@idskmail.com / office@idsk.edu.in

Sponsored by – Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Liaison Office, New Delhi

C-15, SDA Market, New Delhi – 110016, India

Website – <https://www.rosalux.in>

Email – south-asia@rosalux.org

This book will be given free of cost to various government/non-government institutions, policymakers, media, teachers, and students associated with the field of education.

This publication is sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung with grants from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany. This publication or parts of it can be used by others for free as long as they provide a proper reference to the original publication.

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TEA-PRODUCING STATES IN INDIA

HIMACHAL PRADESH

SIKKIM

ASSAM

TRIPURA

WEST BENGAL

KARNATAKA

TAMIL NADU

KERALA

Map not to scale



Ramshuk Tiwari

Kumudranjan Mullick (1883-1970)

To our land there came a man named Ramshuk Tiwari
He used to be a resident of Bundi or of Rewari.

His chest was oh so broad, his belly hung so low
He ate *sattu* made with corn and *litti* by the kilo.

He chewed on tons of *chanaa*, with teeth so strong and stout
And drank a glass of *misri sharbat* after a wrestling bout.

But after he had lived in Bengal for a couple of years
Ramshuk found his future ruined, he harboured many fears.

Every morning, every evening, he began drinking tea
It made him throw up often, it gave him acidity.

The *kaviraj* took up his case, and so did the doctor
His paunch had been deflated, his nose had grown longer.

Now he ate just vegetables, with some boiled rice
Still he belched and hiccupped, it wasn't at all nice.

Pills and tablets and large capsules, everywhere you looked
Potions, mixtures, medicines were all that he now took.

The fancy clubs he exercised with now lay in the dust
The fish that sickly people ate was where he placed his trust.

He had never imagined that he could grow so slim
Undershirts that once were tight now hung loose on him.

When the people back home heard that he was ailing
They couldn't take it anymore, one of them came rushing.

The first thing that he did was to cut off all the tea
In his mother tongue he scolded Ramshuk Tiwari.

Ramshuk went for morning walks, along with his friend
At night he read the Ramayan that Tulsidas had penned.

Having given up his tea, Ramshuk put on weight,
Arhar daal with thick *chapatis* were what he now ate.

He persecuted people if he saw them drinking tea
He was happy, he was thriving, Ramshuk Tiwari.

[Composed: 1931]

1. So many items, so many stories

There's so much you can buy at the neighbourhood grocery store—tea, sugar, chocolate, potatoes, onions, wheat, flour. You can't count the number of items on the fingers of your hand. The grown-ups go shopping at the beginning of the month with their shopping lists. Not every family is into monthly shopping though. For some of them it's just a run to the shop to get what you want, whenever you need it. Who has the time to think deeply about these simple daily tasks? But behind these little items of everyday needs lie long, colourful histories. Take chocolate, for example. It's made with the fruit of the cocoa tree. There used to be lots of such trees in Middle and South America. The indigenous people there would make a chocolate drink from the fruit. Travellers from Spain tasted this drink when they arrived in South America, and brought it back with them. Europe slowly took to eating chocolate from the sixteenth century onwards. And then the rest of the world got acquainted with the taste.

The history of the potato is also connected to people travelling from one country to another. Whether in *biryani* or in *phuchka* (or *pani puri* or *golgappa*, depending on where you live in India), whether as French Fries or as chips,

we can't live a day without potatoes. And yet the potato was completely unknown to people in our country till the seventeenth century. It was the Portuguese who taught us to eat potatoes. They had dropped anchor at several ports on the western and southern coasts of India after sailing from Europe. With them came many new varieties of food, vegetables and recipes. That was when potato-farming began here. So, reading up the history of the potato also allows us to learn a good deal about the history of the Portuguese.

Like the Portuguese, traders from various countries visited the Indian subcontinent at various times. Armenians, Dutch, French, British—they hailed from all over the world. Many of them who came for business also tried to seize power. The British were the most successful among them, reigning over much of India for nearly 200 years. Clothes, food, fruits, and articles of daily use from different corners of the world reached India through these people from various countries. In the same way, they also took away a variety of items to their own lands.

To make a list of the things that went from our country to other lands, let's go back to the neighbourhood grocery. The shopkeeper stores wheat, flour, rice, sugar, and many other things in burlap sacks. These sacks began to be used all

over the world from the middle of the nineteenth century. Cotton, sugar, rice, wheat and spices—all of these used to be transported from one place to another in burlap sacks. Burlap is made from jute. The soil of the delta region of Bengal consists of the silt brought in by the Ganga, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. This delta is also rich in lakes, canals, tributaries, and distributaries. All this made it suitable for jute cultivation. From East Bengal (today's Bangladesh) and Assam, the jute used to reach Calcutta through rivers on small boats or steamers. There were numerous jute mills around Calcutta. Their owners bought some of this jute and made different kinds of burlap sacks with them. Most of the remaining raw jute would go all the way to Britain. There too it was used to make sacks, which British traders then sold to the countries of Europe, America, and Asia.

Alongside jute, thousands of chests of tea were also shipped to different corners of the world from Calcutta port. The cultivation of tea in Assam and around the areas of Darjeeling and Siliguri began during the British period. This tea would be brought to Calcutta on trains and steamers. After this it would be transported to various European countries by sea. At that time Europeans couldn't go without tea even for a day. The royalty in those countries would

sip their tea in luxury from delicate cups and saucers, along with other refreshments. And for poor people, lunch often meant bread dipped in sugary tea. In that bitterly cold climate, it would warm their bodies and make them feel alive.

We, too, cannot do without tea these days. The grown-ups are in the habit of drinking tea every morning and evening. Whenever there's a visitor at home, we offer them a seat and bring them tea and biscuits. On trains, on the pavements, in the college canteen—tea is essential everywhere. And so many different types of tea— milk tea, black tea, lemon tea, even turmeric tea. Nowadays cafes have sprung up everywhere in cities, serving even simple tea at high prices. Just like the British, today we can't imagine our daily lives without tea. So, can a history of tea be written? It definitely can. And every layer of this history holds stories of the relationships between countries, of human behaviour and habits, of traditions and cultures, of oppression and protest. So many stories. You cannot limit yourself to a single country when telling these stories. The tale of tea contains within itself the histories of Bengal and of Assam, of the Indian subcontinent, and of the world. Let's unlock this treasure chest, then, and see what stories we can find in the history of tea.



2. Tea conquers the world

The Chinese emperor Shen Nong had just sat down with a cup of hot water to sip after a long day's work when some dry leaves fell into it. At once the emperor smelt an exquisite fragrance. Instead of throwing it away, he drank the hot water in which the leaves had fallen. Delicious! The emperor felt both physically and mentally invigorated after drinking this cup of leaf-soaked hot water. This was the beginning—it soon became a practice across the country. Apparently, this was how tea was discovered in China, from where the habit of drinking tea spread to different parts of the world.

The story of how Shen Nong discovered tea is in fact a Chinese legend. It is difficult to say how much of it was real and how much imagined. But even historians say that tea was first drunk in China, about 1,600 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. It then took several hundred years for tea to travel across the Great Wall of China. People in Japan and Korea began drinking tea in the sixth and seventh centuries CE. After this, tea reached Vietnam. All of these were Asian countries, and the journey to Europe was still a long way away. It

was thanks to Dutch traders that tea finally reached Europe from Asia in 1607.

Not every part of Europe began drinking tea at the same time. In Britain, for instance, tea arrived with a Portuguese princess named Catherine. She was married to a British prince in 1662. By then, everyone in her country had taken to drinking tea, and she had picked up the habit too. In her husband's house, Catherine discovered— oh god, almost no one even knew what tea was! But she simply couldn't do without it. So, arrangements were made for tea to be served to her. And the rest of the royal family decided to taste this tea to find out what the fuss was all about. Most of them thought it was delicious. Gradually, tea-drinking spread beyond the royal family. Rich or poor, working-class people, writers and poets—tea became a part of everyone's lives.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, some of the elite of South Asia began to emulate the British in drinking tea. Stories are told of Khwaja Abdul Ghani, the Nawab of Dhaka (1813-1896). He spent his days in the company of British magistrates, judges, businessmen, and bureaucrats, from whom he acquired

the habit of drinking tea. In his time, tea would be served in his house every morning. The doors were always open for family, friends, and subjects. The nawab himself only drank tea, but accompaniments were available for guests. The memoirs of Suniti Devi, the queen of Cooch Behar (1864-1932) reveal that she too was fond of tea. She had developed the habit during her travels in England.

The ways of the aristocracy were unique, of course. Their preferences in food and drink could not be compared to the common people's. The capabilities, tastes, and habits of ordinary people were different. So even though the nawab of Dhaka or the queen of Cooch Behar had taken to drinking tea as early as in the nineteenth century, it took several more decades for tea to enter the homes of the people at large. Its popularity began to rise in the second decade of the twentieth century. Tea-sellers sprang up in ones and twos on street corners in various cities. In the 1930s, several shops selling tea leaves came up in Calcutta. Making tea at home became a more frequent affair. This was how tea arrived in your kitchen and mine from the nawab's court.

Some people did have concerns about the benefits and drawbacks of drinking tea. There were considerable debates in newspapers over whether one should drink tea or not, whether it did good or harm to the body. The famous scientist Prafulla Chandra Roy (1861-1944), for instance, was staunchly opposed to tea. According to him, tea reduced appetite, dulled the intelligence, led women astray, and damaged families—and so on. Such beliefs appear quite funny to us now. On the other hand, many doctors used to believe that drinking tea had many benefits. The British also wanted Indians to drink more tea. The battle between these two sides was finally won by the supporters of tea. The tea business in India was almost entirely in the hands of the British. The more tea that was sold, the greater were their profits. So they used to advertise regularly about the benefits of drinking tea at country fairs, as well as in hotels and railway stations. They even distributed free cups of tea throughout the country from motorised vans in order to introduce more people to it. And the habit of drinking tea grew by the day.

The cultivation of tea had begun in India even before the common people

took to drinking it. The British had discovered that the natural environments of Bengal and Assam were perfect for growing tea. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British drank nothing but Chinese tea. Thousands of cases of tea would be exported from China to England. But the British were constantly at loggerheads with the Chinese for various reasons. Around 1830, trade between the two countries became more or less impossible. Neither was willing to meet the conditions set by the other. China was demanding silver in exchange for tea, while the British were unwilling to part with their silver to buy tea. So, it became necessary to think of alternatives. The British began to explore whether it was possible to grow tea somewhere other than China. Tea seeds were brought to India as an experiment, and this was when something remarkable happened. A Britisher discovered, completely unexpectedly, tea bushes in the jungles of Assam. This changed the fortunes of the British. Let us hear the story of this discovery.



3. The tea gardens of Bengal and Assam

The Britisher who discovered tea in India was actually from Scotland. His name was Robert Bruce. He had come to India as part of the British Army, and had decided to stay on afterwards. His passion was to travel to new places, while his interest was in trade and business. In the course of his travels, he arrived at Rangpur around 1822. Rangpur is in Bangladesh today, but back then the country was quite different. Bangladesh obviously did not exist, and both the appearance and idea of India were unlike what it is now. Rangpur was the capital of the Ahom kings at the time. Here Bruce met a distinguished gentleman named Maniram Dutta Barua, who took him one day to the chief of the Singpho tribe. The Singphos had come from Mongolia via Tibet to the Assam-Arunachal region back in the fourteenth century. By the time Bruce met the tribal king, they had been living in the area for over five hundred years. They had effectively become locals. And these Singphos had known of tea bushes for a long time. They grew tea in their own way, and were in the habit of drinking it too. Bruce was astonished. He was well aware of the negotiations between China and England. He also knew that the officers of the

East India Company were trying to cultivate tea in India. Bruce realised that this would be eminently possible, so that there would be no need to appease China. He died soon after discovering tea in Assam, however, not living long enough to witness the success of Assam tea. His brother Charles arrived in India after his death. Charles Bruce was the one who sent some samples of tea from the region to England. He was in turn joined by yet another brother, and together they set up a tea enterprise.

It is important to point out here that tea from different regions is not the same. The nature of the tea in an area depends on the kind of soil, the quantity of rain, the degree of humidity, how hot and how cold it gets there, and so on. That's why the shopkeeper asks us, "What kind of tea would you like, Assam or Darjeeling?" Even among these there are variations—the specific garden, the time of harvest, and so on determine the taste and flavour of the tea. Similarly, Chinese tea is unique too. When the Bruce brothers discovered tea in Assam, the British were still used to Chinese tea. They weren't very confident about Assam tea at first. They had their doubts about the people who cultivated the tea inside the jungles—would such tea be any good? So, the

British set up the Tea Committee around this time to research the possibilities of growing tea in India. Its task was to gauge the quality of Assam tea, and also to examine whether it would be possible to bring tea seeds from China and cultivate the plant here, and where, besides Assam, tea could be grown in India. After tasting Assam tea, the committee declared that it wasn't bad at all: well worth drinking, in fact. So, there was no need to bring tea seeds from China. Gradually, many tea gardens were set up in Assam, and tea began to be cultivated on a large scale. Finally, forty-six chests of tea left for England for the first time by ship in 1837. This was how the cultivation of tea began on the Indian subcontinent.

There was tremendous demand for tea across Europe at the time, which made the tea trade extremely profitable. The British could make more money if they could grow more tea. Looking for places beyond Assam where tea cultivation might be possible, they turned their attention to the hills of Darjeeling in the north of Bengal. The town of Darjeeling had not yet been created, and the hills were under the rule of the king of Sikkim. The king had given quite a bit of land from his kingdom to the British East India Company in 1835.

The town of Darjeeling was established on this land. Dr. Archibald Campbell brought tea seeds from China to plant them in the garden of his house in the town of Darjeeling. Those particular plants did not survive, but the British did not give up hope. They tried again at a slightly lower altitude, on the slopes of the hills. This time their efforts were fruitful. Within thirty years, tea gardens spread all the way to the Dooars forests near the foot of the Darjeeling hills. They were set up at different heights on the slopes. Later, tea was cultivated even on the peaks of the Darjeeling hills. This tea was unparalleled in taste and flavour. It must be pointed out here that Dooars tea and Darjeeling tea are descendants of Chinese tea, and quite different from Assam tea. But because of differences in temperatures, altitude, and rainfall, Dooars tea and Darjeeling tea are completely unlike each other. One more thing: today, besides Assam and Bengal, tea is also grown in India in Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. It is also grown in India's neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. And besides the Indian subcontinent, there are also tea plantations in, among other places, China (of course), Japan, Vietnam, and Turkey. Kenya on the African continent is also known for its tea. We will come back later to the subject of tea cultivation in Sri Lanka and Kenya.



4. In search of labourers

The British had found high quality tea in India but they didn't care for the way the Singphos grew it. They realised that the bushes growing on their own in the jungle like weeds might slake the thirst of a few, but this would not meet worldwide demand. In China, tea was cultivated on huge tracts of land, then shaken dry and locked into chests, which were sent to the markets at home and abroad. To compete with China, tea would have to be grown in huge quantities on large plots of land. This would need a lot of people. But would any and everyone be able to work in tea estates? Just as the Britishers initially felt Chinese tea was the best, so too did they have enormous trust in Chinese farmers. They considered bringing people from China to grow tea in India. Many of them felt that it would be a good idea to get Chinese farmers to train the people of Assam and the Dooars in the intricacies of growing tea. A couple of attempts were made, but bringing people over from a distant country was expensive. Besides, even the handful of Chinese farmers who agreed to come fell sick after the long journey. So, the British had to think of other means. Not many people could be found in Assam to work on the tea gardens. The British surmised that perhaps these people were not greatly

in need of money. In truth, the wages set aside for tea garden workers were meagre. The Singphos and other locals made a living from farming at the time—why would they agree to toiling day and night for such low wages?

But then there was no lack of poor people in this unfortunate country. Labourers were found far away from Assam and the Dooars—in the Chhotanagpur region of Bihar. Almost everyone there belonged to the Adivasi tribes of Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, and Gonds. They lived in great poverty. The land was not fertile to begin with, and there had been repeated droughts in the nineteenth century. On top of this there were taxes and debts to moneylenders. All of this meant that they were living in desperate conditions. Some people were appointed to coax, convince, and, if necessary, force these tribal men to go to the tea gardens and work there. Known as sardars, these supervisors were also from Chhotanagpur—they worked for the owners of tea plantations. It wasn't difficult for the sardars to find enough people among the impoverished who were willing to move to the tea gardens for work.

Efforts to bring in workers from Chhotanagpur began in 1841 under the initiative of the Assam Tea Company. But almost none of those who agreed to move that year actually made it to the gardens in Assam. All of them lost their

lives helplessly during their travel under the onslaught of an epidemic. But the British kept looking for labourers continuously. In 1859, the 'Tea Planters' Association was formed by the owners of all the tea gardens. This organisation took up the responsibility of efficiently bringing over labourers from Bihar and engaging them in the gardens. In the tea gardens of Darjeeling, though, it was mainly Nepali labourers who did the work. Many people came over from Nepal in search of work when the town of Darjeeling came up. Their reasons for moving were the same—no food at home, no work in the land, no money in the pocket. Many of them found a place for themselves on the tea estates. Also, those who left Chhotanagpur in search of work didn't go only to the tea gardens of Bengal and Assam, they also went to work in the jute mills of Calcutta, the coal mines of Bihar, and the sugarcane and cotton plantations in countries across the ocean. All of these journeys were made because they were driven by poverty to search for a more comfortable existence, with the hope of a new life. This picture has not changed greatly in our country. Millions of poor people still travel thousands of miles in search of work—sometimes to other states, sometimes to other countries, and sometimes to distant cities.



5. Masters and workers

The *sardar* says work till you're numb
The *babu* says force them to come
The *sahib* says beat them like a drum
Hey Joduram
You fooled us into going to Assam
[Oral poem]

Supervisors, managers, owners, and labourers—every tea garden comprised each of these. The rhyme was heard among the people here. In the very first line we read how the *sardars* or supervisors gathered people by tempting them with prospects of work in the tea estates of Assam. Above these supervisors were the managers, whose job was to look after the affairs of the tea garden on a daily basis and keep account of profits and losses. Whenever labourers were needed, they instructed the supervisors to get hold of more workers. Above the managers were the owners, the heads of the tea plantations. The owners were intent on making quick profits, and if the supervisors couldn't get hold of enough people, the quantity of tea cultivated would go down, and so would profits. So, the owners may well have threatened the supervisors with taking

the skin off their backs if they couldn't hire workers. Hence, the supervisor in this case, whose name may have been Joduram, brought workers to one tea-garden or another in Assam with false promises and visions of happiness. And perhaps someone who saw these workers' plight composed the rhyme in rage and disappointment.

It wasn't just this one rhyme. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, we read about the anger and disappointments and sorrow of these workers in a number of articles, plays, novels, and even government reports. A schoolteacher named Dwarakanath Gangopadhyay (1844-1898) used to travel around the tea gardens of Assam and write of their suffering regularly in the newspapers. In 1875, Dakshinaranjan Chattopadhyay wrote his famous play *Chaa-kor Dorpon*, a title that punned on the similarity between the words referring to a tax on tea (*chaa-kor*), and to a servant (*chaakor*). A large number of people who watched the play realised the misery that farmers and labourers were subjected to by the British owners of tea gardens. 'Are we drinking tea or the blood of workers?' This was the question asked at the time. But why all this rage and anguish and despair from labourers? As we've seen already, the work was very hard, the wages were very low, and the managers and owners

were always ready with threats. The slightest mistake led to punishment.

Practically all the owners and most of the managers were British during colonial rule in India. There was indeed a small number of Indian owners of tea gardens, but they were few and far between. Actually, the British government gave great benefits to their compatriots to encourage them to set up tea gardens in India. And the owners would send the profits back home to England. So, the people of India had very little to gain. Indians did get jobs as assistants to the tea estate managers, especially young educated Bengali men. Some of them were even put in charge of the accounts. The supervisor's rank was below that of the assistant manager's and the cashier's. And the lowest of all on the tea garden was the labourer, whose labour was the hardest.

The supervisors would look for those willing to move with their wives and children. They felt these people would settle down easily if their families were with them, and wouldn't return home abruptly. Among the labourers, women and men were given different tasks. When the tea plantations were being set up, it was the men who took care of cultivation, with the women helping them as needed. In the twentieth century, the nature of the tasks assigned to women changed. The owners of the gardens felt that women were better suited to pluck

the tea leaves, for their slim fingers were useful for this delicate job. Ever since then, women have been gathering tea leaves in baskets carried on their backs.

Plucking leaves was the most important task in tea gardens, and women were in charge of it. But amazingly, women's wages were lower than men's. At the end of the nineteenth century, men would be paid Rs 3-4, while women labourers would get Rs 2 or even less. You can see how wide the gap was. It was never closed. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, men earned monthly wages of Rs 6, and women, Rs 4.80. The tea garden owners would allot light work to the children too. Their earnings were the lowest of all, just Rs 2.80.

Another important thing: the women never actually got to keep the money they earned for themselves. The practice was to pay family wages, all of which would be handed over to the main male member of the family. Let's say a man named Dukhi Singh, his wife Chandramukhi, and their two sons and three daughters start work on a tea plantation. The wages allocated to Dukhi and his family are entered in the books. The owner's representative will hand over the entire money to Dukhi. No matter how hard she worked, Chandramukhi will always have to ask him for money to run the household. How unfair

is that! The system of family wages may have been abolished in independent India, but even today, women earn less than men in tea gardens; even though it's still women who do most of the work when it comes to plucking tea leaves. The men, on the other hand, mostly work in the adjoining factories. Here the leaves plucked in the garden go through steps called withering, rolling, drying, and so on to prepare them for sale. Women have slender fingers, which enables them to pluck tea leaves easily—they do not have to learn afresh. But the men have to learn how to use the machines in the factory. So, according to the terms used by governments, owners, and experts, women are unskilled labourers, while men are skilled. But how is it to be decided who is skilled and who isn't? Can women not work in factories if they are taught? Of course they can! And just as men can cook and sew, so too can they pluck tea leaves if they practise. In fact, it is the intent of the owners of tea gardens to use this vague logic of ability or the lack of it, of learning or its absence, to pay lower wages to women. It's not just on tea estates—from films to sports, from brick kilns to repair-work, in most fields women still get paid less than men. Discriminating between girls and boys, between women and men, in this way is not right at all. But from investors to traders, from advertising agencies to even the government of the country, no one is ready to think deeply about this.



6. Life in tea gardens

Tea plantation labourers had to do so many different things. It began with clearing the jungle to set up the garden. Then they had to nurture the tea seeds with great care in the nursery for at least three years. After this they transplanted the saplings in the tea garden. Once the plants had grown, the real work of plucking the leaves began. Because tea plants grow wildly like bushes, it also had to be trimmed to prevent it from becoming too tall or expanding sideways. The workers' day began at dawn. The labourers lived in quarters constructed for them on one side of the tea garden. The siren went off at five in the morning—everyone had to wake up and get ready to start work at six. It rang again at six in the evening to signal the end of the working day.

The tea garden clocks were not synchronised to the ones in the world outside. The earth spins like a top from the west to the east. So, in the eastern regions, the sun rises early and sets early too. The Dooars, Darjeeling and Assam are in eastern India, so dawn comes to Guwahati much earlier than in Delhi, and so does sunset. But the clocks in both places show 6 am at the same time. This

is because every country follows the local time in one or more specific places to set the clock. In India, for instance, it is the local time in Allahabad (now renamed Prayagraj) whose local time is used as the official time across the entire country. But Allahabad lies to the west of the Dooars and Assam. Daylight comes to the tea gardens well before it's 6 am in Allahabad and officially across the country. But the work has to be completed before daylight wanes, since snakes and dangerous animals might appear in the darkness. And the delicate task of plucking tea leaves can hardly be done by the light of a lantern. So, the British owners cleverly invented something called 'garden time'. The clock was set half an hour ahead of Indian Standard Time in Darjeeling and the Dooars, and an hour ahead further east in Assam. Why go to so much trouble? It was to ensure that no time was wasted, and that the labourers could be made to do as much work as possible every day.

Completely different from the painful lives of the labourers on tea plantations were those of the owners or managers, who spent their days in great comfort. There was no dearth of luxury and leisure in the lives of their families either.

Polo on horseback, regular feasts, musical performances, and so on were everyday affairs. Let alone the labourers, not even the supervisors were invited to these entertainments.

You know what's sad? The British left India after Independence, and were replaced by Indian owners and managers. But the lives of the labourers didn't change. So, in 1950, the workers of several tea gardens in Darjeeling joined hands to begin an agitation. Wages must be increased in new India, they said. The police opened fire on them, and six defenceless workers were killed. Now a widespread agitation began, with work stopping in all tea estates. The owners were in despair, and so was the government. No supply of tea in the market meant enormous losses. Then the central government in Delhi got involved. In 1951, the new government of free India passed a new law with plenty of fine promises made to tea plantation workers. Although wages wouldn't be increased, the government declared that living conditions would have to be improved, and schools and hospitals would be built for the labourers and their children. But do you think the tea garden owners paid any attention? Working

conditions remained unchanged in most of the gardens. The government of independent India pretended that they could see none of this, and the owners were not punished. The labourers realised that whether it was the British government or an Indian one, no one had kept their word, no one ever keeps their word.

But that doesn't mean the workers endured this injustice in silence. Both before 1950 and after, they protested against many forms of oppression and tyranny. Sometimes the workers of various tea gardens united to stand up against injustice, at other times the labourers in individual tea estates confronted the owners. Sometimes the workers' protests proved successful, with the owners accepting some of the demands. On other occasions, it was the workers who had to accept defeat. So many stories of these workers are blended into steaming cups of tea; just as there are many accounts of their being oppressed, there is an equal number of tales of their rising boldly in protest.



7. Grandma Nirala of Dhumchipara

Dhumchipara is nearly 130 kilometres from Siliguri. The tea garden here is a very old one. The Duncans were the owners of this garden in the British era. Like Robert Bruce, they too were from Scotland. But after India became independent, they sold their tea estate to an Indian business family, the Goenkas. There are several gardens around the Dhumchipara garden, almost all of them belonging to the Duncans once and to the Goenkas now. We have been to these gardens several times in the course of our research.

It was in this Dhumchipara tea garden that we met Grandma Nirala—Nirala *Dida*—in 2011. According to her own calculations she was nearly 90 then. Her entire life had been spent on the plantation. The people from the neighbouring estates all knew of her. By the time we met her, she no longer worked in the garden, having retired long ago. But she was by no means tired of talking. Nirala *Dida* used to rear chickens and spend her time chatting with everyone. Sitting outside her tiny room in the workers' quarters, she told us stories of her life. Stories of how her family moved to the tea garden, of her life there, of her wedding, of festivals, of the infestation of elephants and cheetahs, and of hardships and grievances. How effortlessly she told us all these tales spanning

a long period of time! We followed the threads in her stories to talk to more people. We pored over books, newspapers and other reports. When we pieced all the information together, the history of the tea garden of Dhumchipara became clear to us.

Six generations of Nirala *Dida*'s family had been living on the estate. A *sardar* had brought her great grandfather to the tea garden to work here. It was the early days of the garden, and *Dida*'s grandfather was a small boy then. He had come with his father, along with his mother and brothers and sisters. But why had *Dida*'s great grandfather travelled such a long distance? Because of the hardships in his own village, you see. And there were so many people at home. There wasn't enough food for everyone. Meanwhile the tea garden supervisors were visiting the village regularly in search of workers. *Dida*'s great grandfather thought moving to the tea plantation would mean fewer hardships. It was a long and arduous journey, stories of which Nirala *Dida* had heard from her grandfather. The supervisors would beat up anyone who lagged behind or stopped for a little rest. Food and water were not always available on the road. Many people fell ill—the journey proved so gruelling for Nirala's great grandmother that she never quite recovered. The children found the

travels even harder. Whenever they stopped, Dida's great grandfather would convince them that their destination was close by, and a hot meal and a new house were waiting for them. Reassured, they would resume walking.

Dida had seen many things change in the tea gardens during her ninety-year life. People no longer come to tea estates in search of work. Just the opposite, in fact—these days people leave the gardens. *Dida's* granddaughter Sushma has left for Delhi, for instance, where she is a domestic worker. And what should they stay back for? Things are in bad shape, and the tea estates in and around Dhumchipara are shut down frequently. Even the meagre wages remain unpaid. Schools and hospitals don't work. Fed up, the young generation goes off to the big cities in search of a livelihood. Many of those who haven't moved work as rock-breakers by the river. It isn't possible to depend on the plantations anymore. And yet, even a few decades earlier, the Dhumchipara tea garden was bustling. The Duncan-Goenka Garden had a far better harvest compared to many others. So many people used to work here. Plucking the leaves, processing them in the factory, despatching them in huge trucks to auction houses—there was no end of things to be done. Why this sudden downturn in fortunes? There are many answers to this question, let us explain them one by one.



8. The ledger of tea garden closures

To discuss the decline of tea estates we have to go back to 1991. That was the year the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, also known as the Soviet Union) was split into many parts. The Soviet Union was a coalition of fifteen countries around Russia, covering a large portion of Europe and Asia. It was formed in 1922. Even if we call it a coalition, don't imagine it to be a grouping of independent countries with equal rights. It was Russia that used to rule them all, with the entire power over the Union being in the hands of the Communist Party. In the 1970s and '80s, the USSR was the main customer of the tea produced in Bengal and Assam. The trade agreement between the USSR and India involved a kind of barter. The USSR used to provide heavy industrial machinery to India, in exchange for which India would send tea and some other commodities. When the Soviet Union split in 1991, the other fifteen countries declared themselves independent. This collapse of a system that had run so long was no small matter. It was a big blow for the economy. Our tea industry fell on its face because of this blow. The trade in tea plunged abruptly. Many tea gardens closed down, though Dhumchipara or its neighbouring gardens did not meet that fate immediately. But the profits of the owners shrank, and so did their interest in the tea industry. Paying the

workers on time, taking care of all their needs, and replacing ageing plants in the garden with new ones were all expensive propositions. The owners were intent on their profits, but they didn't loosen their grip on cost control. As profits dwindled, their hold became stronger, and they began to reduce their expenses by the day. The outcome was inevitable. Within twenty years, the tea gardens began to close down one by one. Sometimes the workers did manage to form groups and continue with the cultivation, selling the tea they grew directly to retail buyers like you and me. Sometimes the government took over the ailing tea estates and tried to keep them going. But the old glory of the region never came back. Seems funny, doesn't it? The USSR was so far away, and yet the trouble there made the tea industry totter here in India.

So, when the USSR split and tea exports plunged, why didn't India look for other customers? Some of you must be wondering about this. An appropriate question. It was only a matter of selling the tea, after all, whether to the USSR or some other country. Actually, it wasn't easy to find other customers, because by then tea from Kenya and Sri Lanka had captured the markets in other countries of the world. Those accustomed to Darjeeling tea would have considered the tea from Kenya or Sri Lanka distinctly inferior in both aroma

and flavour. But whether a particular flavour or aroma is pleasant or not is a matter of personal taste and habit. For instance, some people are enchanted by the smell of Hilsa, while others feel nauseous. Someone who has become used to Kenyan tea is bound to like its taste. Moreover, Kenyan tea is much cheaper. So, there weren't too many people in other countries who would give up the tea from Kenya or Sri Lanka and buy Indian tea instead. The tea from our country couldn't find a major buyer to replace the USSR.

In fact, even among the wealthy people who drank expensive tea and turned their nose up at the Kenyan variety, there were signs of dissatisfaction with Indian tea at this time. There were complaints that chemical fertilisers and pesticides were being used in India's tea gardens, which was unhealthy for humans. It isn't just about us; the environment is also damaged by the use of such chemicals. They harm the soil of the tea gardens and loosen it too much. Many people decided not to spend money knowingly on harmful products. This meant trouble all round. There were no major buyers, the market was flooded by the cheap tea from Kenya and Sri Lanka, and on top of this, there were problems with Indian tea. We must point out here that many tea garden owners have become aware of health and environmental factors now. The use

of pesticides has dropped. They are experimenting with various methods of binding the soil. The tea from these gardens is very expensive, but there are buyers for it in the West, and in our country too.

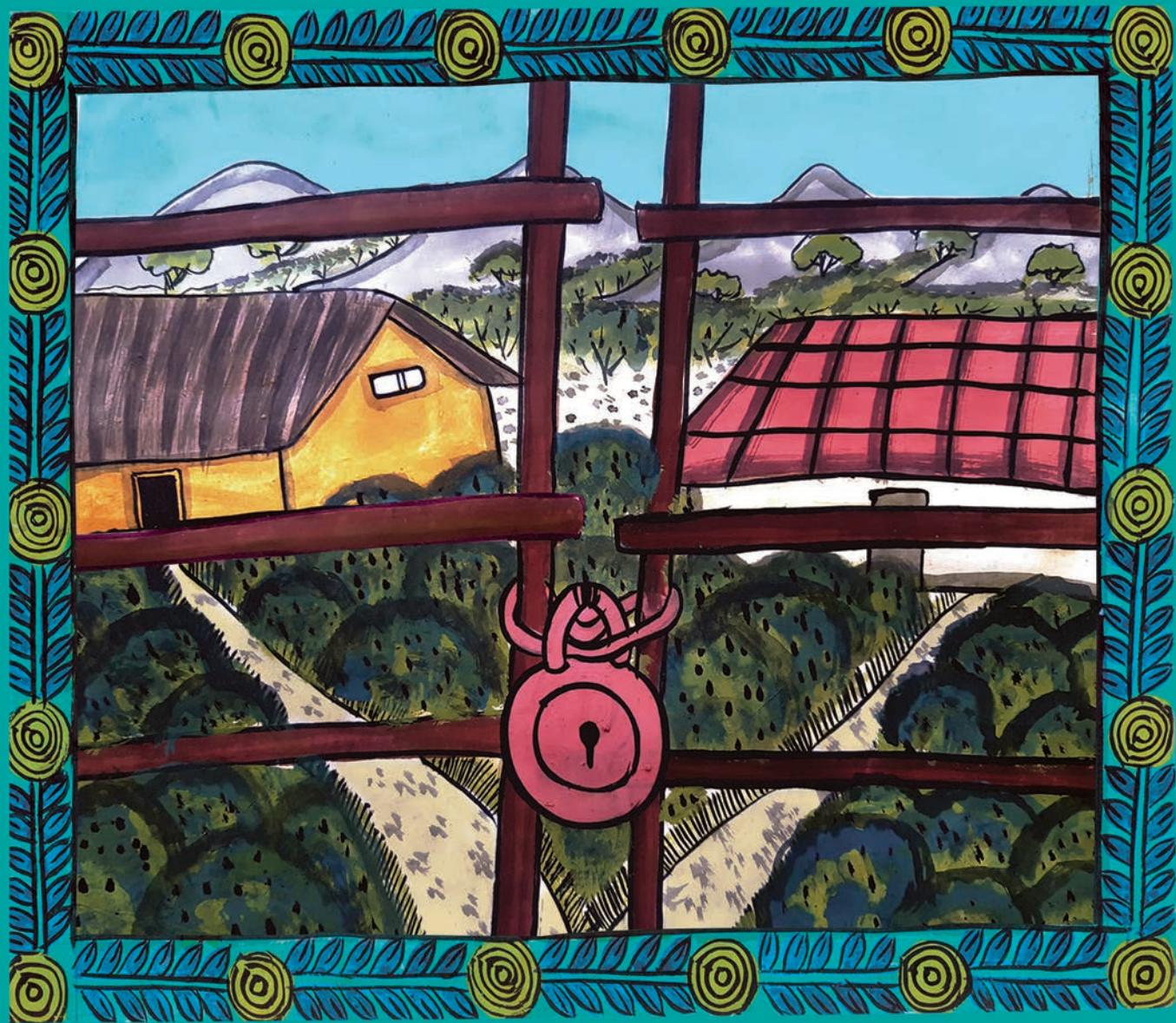
But the complex relationships between different countries and the debates over health and the environment do not fully reveal the plight of the tea plantations. We have no choice but to list the faults of the tea garden owners. There are variations among these owners. Many of the tea gardens now are owned by big Indian business groups like Goodricke, Unilever, or the Tatas, while the keys to some others are in the hands of medium and semi-medium Indian businesspeople. Several huge foreign companies run the tea business across different countries. They have businesses in India too. It isn't as though these Indian and foreign big and medium business people own nothing but tea gardens. They own factories as well, where the leaves plucked from the garden are made usable for tea-drinkers. From the factories the tea goes to the auction-houses in big cities, where big and small tea-sellers buy their supplies. The owners of these auction houses are big business people too, like the Tatas. It is they who decided the prices at which the tea is bought and sold. Their scheme is to buy cheap from the tea gardens and sell at high prices in the

market. Those who have got into business will naturally try to increase their profits. Nothing surprising there. The question of injustice arises when the workers whose round-the-clock labour make these profits possible are not paid their dues. There is often news of tea estate workers starving to death. Even those who do get food don't get enough. They starve too, and fall sick. Repeated research has shown that those who live on India's tea plantations lag a great deal behind the rest of the country on various standards of education and health. But the big corporations who own and run tea gardens pay no attention. All they care for is that profits should grow. This is precisely why tea garden workers are resentful.

So much for big business—but what about the owners of small businesses? Many of them are to be found across Assam and the Dooars today. We may have referred to them as business people, but it's better to call them farmers. They cultivate tea on their own land with a handful of people—only as much as their limited resources allow. They have no factories of their own. They pluck the leaves and sell them to nearby factories. They cannot dictate prices—so they make their profits in other ways. They make short-term contracts with workers, who are laid off frequently. There is no question of building schools

for workers' children, arranging for medical treatment, giving bonuses for festivals or special occasions, or even granting holidays as the laws demand. The cultivation of tea in small gardens is going up, which means losses rather than gains for hardworking labourers.

All said, then, these are unsettled times on tea plantations. There's not enough work, and wages are low, so that it's very hard to make a living. Half-fed or unfed as they are, how long will the Sushmas remain on tea gardens, Nirala *Dida* asked us. She was right, we reflected. At one time so many people had left their homes in Bihar in search of a better life on tea estates—today their descendants go off to Delhi or to Mumbai, to Kolkata or to Bengaluru, in search of work. Some of them find jobs as domestic workers, some set up roadside shops to sell momos, some pick up hairdressing skills to work at personal care parlours. And then their brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, neighbours and classmates follow them. This kind of work is also insecure. Still, a new wave of migrations begins this way. The poor leave their homes in search of a living.



Complicated words and concepts

Indian subcontinent: The area comprising India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives is known as the Indian subcontinent. It is also called South Asia.

Century: A hundred-year period. We are now (2023) in the twenty-first century. The twenty-second century will begin in 2101. In the same way, the period between 1801 and 1900 was the nineteenth century, and between 1901 and 2000.

Export: When something is sent from one country to another to be sold there, this is known as export. Its opposite is import.

Cashier: The person who keeps the money.

Communist: Someone who believes in Communism. Communism is an ideology. Those who believe in it want a social

and economic system where there will be no such thing as personal ownership of property. Everyone will own and use it collectively. No one will be rich or poor in such a society. There will be equality between people.

Indigenous People: Indigenous people are the first inhabitants of an area with no history of migrating or invading the area from somewhere else. In India tribes and traditional forest dwellers are often considered indigenous groups.





And finally

How did we come to know of all the things we have been telling you? Is there any proof that we didn't make it all up? If we claim to be writing history, we certainly have to provide evidence. To write this book we have read other books written by learned people. Let us list them:

- Piya Chatterjee (2003). *A Time for Tea: Women's Labor and Post-Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation*.
- Ravi Raman (2010). *Global Capital and Peripheral Labour: The History and Political Economy of Plantation Workers in India*.
- Gautam Bhadra (2005). *From an Imperial Product to a National Drink: Culture of Tea Consumption in Modern India*.
- Rana Behal (2014). *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam*.

One more thing. One of us (Supurna) has been conducting research on tea gardens for a long time. She has read the works of other researchers, spoken to many people like Nirala Dida on the tea gardens, and examined many documents and records in libraries and government offices. She has written an entire book and

many articles based on her research. Her book is titled *Activism and Agency in India: Nurturing Resistance in the Tea Plantations* (2017).

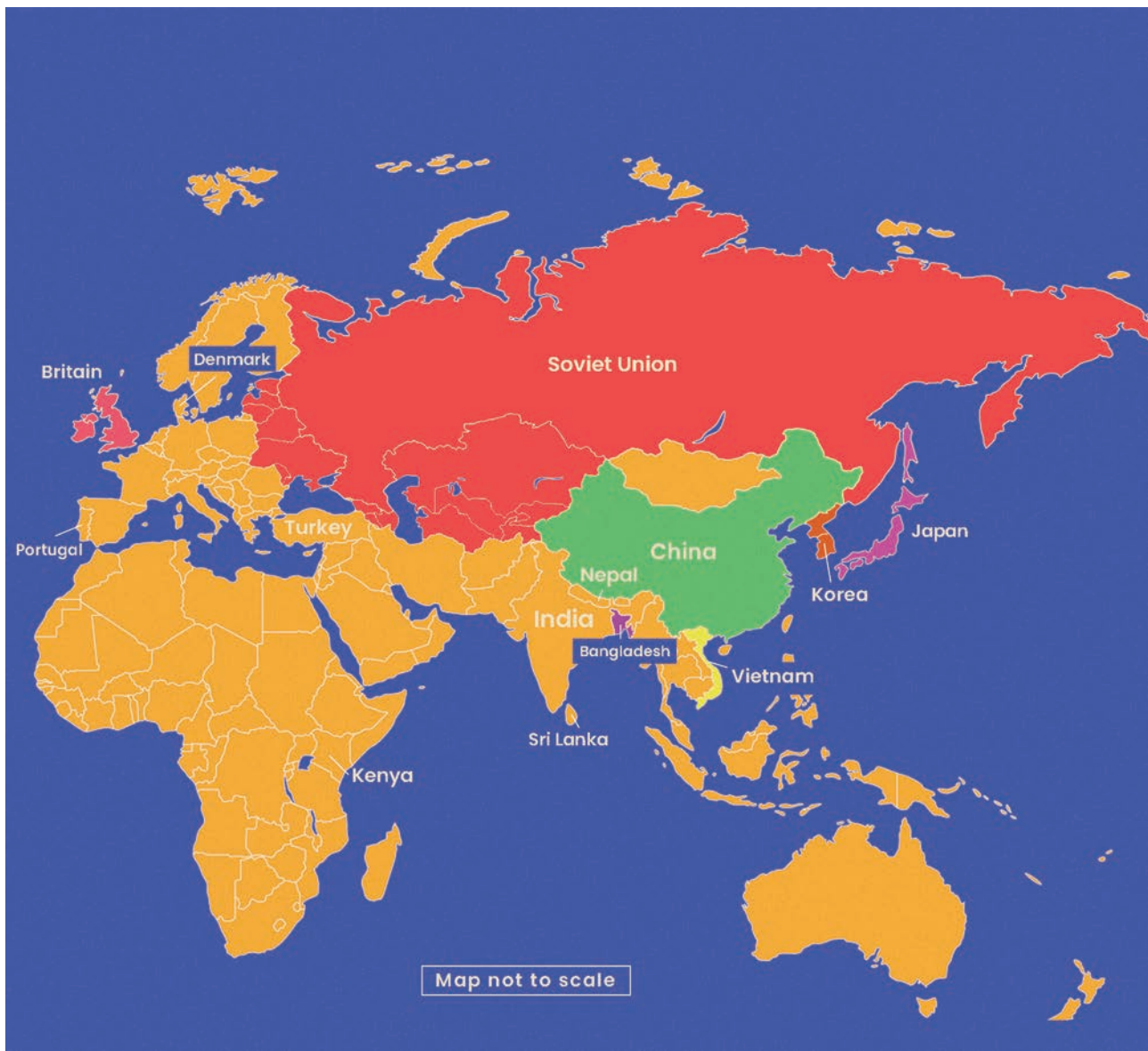
In addition to these, there are some wonderful books on cash crops like chocolate, cotton, jute, coffee, tobacco, or sugar. Let us quickly name a couple of them.

On sugar: Sidney W. Mintz (1985), *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*.

And on cotton: Sven Beckert (2014), *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*.

Many people gave us their views and offered encouragement after reading the first draft of this book in two workshops and in their personal capacities. Let us give you their names: Achin Chakraborty, Amitava Gupta, Anirban Mandal, Adrija Mukherjee, Asokendu Sengupta, Arvi Pal, Wrijiwan Mukherjee, Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, Oishee Dutta, Utsa Roy, Kritika Sengupta, Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, Khushi Shikari, Chandana Mandal, Tanika Sarkar, Devtanu Raha, Debarati Bagchi, Payel Khatun, Prithviraj Guha, Bijoli Raj Patra, Madhura Damle, Rayesha Mahmood, Rita Banerjee, Ruma Khatun, Rupkatha, Hia Sen, Sagnik Sengupta, Simantini Mukhopadhyay, and Santanu Sengupta. We are grateful to them.

We are grateful to Somrita Urni Ganguly for her comments on the English translation.



Britain

Denmark

Soviet Union

Portugal

Turkey

China

Japan

Korea

Nepal

India

Bangladesh

Vietnam

Sri Lanka

Kenya

Map not to scale

About the Author, Translator and the Artists

Supurna Banerejee and Anwasha Sengupta have written this book. Supurna teaches Sociology and Political Science at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK), and Anwasha teaches History at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK).

Arunava Sinha has translated this book into English. He is a literary translator and Associate Professor of creative writing at Ashoka University.

Shabnam Yasmin has done the art direction, cover and maps for this book. She is a graphic designer by profession. She does illustrations, covers, and art direction for many Indian and foreign publishers.

The illustrations in this book are by Ranjit Chitrakar and Sirajudaulla Chitrakar. By family tradition they are pata artists—those who make art on fabric. Ranjit and Shiraz work in the village of Naya, which is under the jurisdiction of Pingla police station in the West Medinipur district of West Bengal. Following the tradition of pata art, they primarily paint narratives and compose songs about Hindu gods and goddesses. But these days their art covers other themes too. Pata art is an example of the tradition of religious harmony in Bengal. Although the artists are often Muslims, their art and lyrics are usually centred on stories of Hinduism. What's more, according to their own social narrative, they are descendants of the Hindu god Viswakarma. This is how Islam and Hinduism are blended in their lives and work

The Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK) was set up in 2002 by the Government of West Bengal as an autonomous centre of excellence in social sciences. It is a society with an autonomous governing body with eminent scholars and Government's nominees. IDSK is recognized for its advanced academic research and informed policy advice in the areas of literacy, education, health, gender, employment, technology, communication, human sciences and economic development. The academic programmes at IDSK include MPhil (2006-2022) and PhD in social sciences and short training courses for research scholars. It offers state-of-the-art IT and library facilities to its students and research scholars. It is fully funded by the Government of West Bengal. IDSK has been recognized by the ICSSR under the category of "ICSSR Recognized Research Institutes".

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a German political foundation that is part of the democratic socialist movement. True to the legacy of its namesake Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), it stands in solidarity with the workers' and women's rights movements. The organization serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as research centre for social development. The RLS has close ties to the German party DIE LINKE. RLS provides political education and a centre for advanced social research in both Germany and throughout the world. RLS is one of six party-affiliated political foundations in Germany; it supports partners in over 80 countries striving for social justice, strengthening public participation, and social ecological development.



How do you learn history while keeping your eyes and ears open? What does it mean to be conscious of history? The series 'First History Lessons' was born from the search for answers to these questions. Each of the books is on a unique subject. The text is accompanied by pictures drawn by patachitra artists. The objective of this book is to explain, simply, various periods and various complex ideas in history. After reading these books, children will learn to ask questions—that is our hope.

